


FORMATION AND THE KOINONIA CHURCH

By VICKY COSSTICK

 F ALL THE RECENT MEDIA coverage of the roller-coaster change in Eastern Europe, one image has rested with me vividly. It is from an account by a Romanian taxi-driver shown on BBC TV's *Panorama* of the beginnings of the revolt outside Ceausescu's palace. We have seen many times the pictures of Ceausescu's face falling from arrogant delusion to disbelief and then panic as he realized that the crowd that had been herded into the square to affirm his popularity had turned against him. But it is the activity in the crowd itself, unfilmed, which is of greater interest.

In Romania, there was little possibility of organized dissent. Neighbour distrusted neighbour; relative distrusted relative, such was the network of state informers. But in the square outside the palace that day, *individuals* began to demonstrate, with enormous courage, their protest. Holding the collars of their jackets across their faces, they began to raise their voices against Ceausescu, and the protest spread like wildfire through the crowd. Who was the first to raise his or her voice in this way? We shall probably never know.

What interests me profoundly here, and in this article, is the relationship of the individual and his or her action—and belief—to the way that change affects the small group, the large group, society as a whole. Do we believe that what individuals think and do and believe matters beyond the narrowest orbit of the individual herself? I believe that, as Christians, we must: that the faith—or, more importantly, the growth in faith—of the individual is essentially linked to the progress of humanity.

This understanding is echoed in *Christi fideles laici*, the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World (hereafter *CFL*), published in January 1989:

... a 'cultural' effect can be accomplished through work done not so much by an individual alone but by an individual as a

'social being', that is, as a member of a group, of a community, of an association, or of a movement. Such work, then, is the source and stimulus leading to the transformation of the surroundings and society as well as the fruit and sign of every other transformation in this regard (*CFL* 29).

This article is based on my reflections to date on theory and practice: on three years of work in adult formation by a diocesan team, and on the texts of the *Rite of Christian initiation of adults* and *CFL*.¹ In both these texts, the dominant themes are the call to conversion, and to community, ministry and mission. Nowhere has the *koinonia* model of Church been developed more powerfully than in *CFL*. The document examines the images in scripture for a model of the Church as communion, expands the theology of the Church as communion, and looks at the appropriate structures and mechanisms for dialogue and discernment within such a communion.

From its earliest paragraphs, there are within *CFL* certain fundamental assumptions about the nature of communion which are of central concern for this article.

Firstly, the purpose of communion is *mission*; the vineyard to which the labourers are called is the whole world, 'which is to be transformed according to the plan of God in view of the final coming of the Kingdom' (*CFL* 1). It is clear, therefore, that nothing less radical than transformation is envisaged. The communion of which *CFL* speaks is no cosy club.

Secondly, the mission is a collaborative enterprise:

Lay people as well as pastors, clergy and men and women religious are personally called by the Lord, from whom they receive a mission on behalf of the Church and the world (*CFL* 2).

This shared responsibility flows directly from the equality of all the baptized (*CFL* 15).

Thirdly, the mission demands 'total and ongoing formation' (*CFL* 57) and that formation should itself be collaborative: 'the lay faithful are formed by the Church and in the Church in a mutual communion and collaboration of all her members: clergy, religious and lay faithful' (*CFL* 61).

To sum up, communion is essentially linked to mission; mission is essentially linked to formation; formation is essentially linked to transformation—and the whole enterprise is a collaborative one

because clergy, laity and religious share by virtue of their common baptism more than divides them.

What does it mean to assert this link between communion and formation? For *CFL* never mentions the word 'education', still less 'training'. I understand that for some people the word 'formation' holds negative connotations. It implies an end-goal and perhaps some degree of indoctrination. This apparently emerges from the use, or over-use, of the word formation to describe what happens, or used to happen, in religious communities. Formation implies docility, just as community to some implies a spirit-deadening conformity. Formation is what was attempted in *One flew over the cuckoo's nest*.

I hasten to add that this has never been my view of formation; it is religious themselves who have suggested to me that this might have gone on in religious 'communities'. Here my concern is to propose a positive understanding of formation, which, for reasons I hope to make clear, I shall call the 'mustard seed' approach. In so doing, I am not concerned, however, to look in a detailed manner at the distinction between education and formation, although I am assuming that there is one. We can be educated when we read a book, see a film or play, watch a TV programme. Some would say we are educated when we learn a fact, or are taught a series of facts. Whatever age we are, education will be more effective if it meets us at the level of our experience, uses language that we can understand, and leaves us free to draw our own conclusions. But in order for us to be formed as Christians, something different and/or additional has to happen. It is the task, method and context of Christian formation that I would like to spend the bulk of this article examining.

Firstly and foremostly, formation implies a *spirituality* both on the part of those who are being formed and those doing the forming. This single point serves, actually, as an umbrella for all that follows. Formation, if used in a secular context, could imply an ideology, but this is not what I mean. It is perhaps the ideological content or end-goal of formation that has led to its abuse under certain circumstances. For example, a multi-national weapons manufacturer could 'form' its staff and its managers, implying just the sort of docility and indoctrination that we have referred to earlier. But a gospel-based spirituality of formation cannot be confused with an ideology. Formation implies that the persons doing the forming at any one moment are themselves growing in

faith and as likely to be themselves being formed at the next moment.

Formation implies, therefore, *freedom of choice*, enabling and empowerment. There is no final homogeneous product towards which we are working. Luke tells us at the inauguration of Jesus's ministry that he takes on the promise of Isaiah to 'proclaim liberty to captives' (Lk 4,18). At the end of Jesus's earthly ministry, Luke tells us that on the road to Emmaus, having (creatively) listened to the disciples, having unfolded the scriptures for them, Jesus behaved 'as if he were going further' (Lk 24,28). Without speculating on what might have become of the Church if the disciples had not asked him to stay with them, we note that Jesus offered the disciples a free choice. If it was an offer that they could not refuse, it was because of the total integrity both of the truth that he told and the manner in which he offered it to them.

Formation is oriented, therefore, towards freedom from enslavement. *CFL* makes this connection with its early stress on fundamental human dignity and the 'violations to which the human person is subjected':

The sense of the dignity of the human person must be pondered and reaffirmed in stronger terms. A beneficial trend is advancing and permeating all peoples of the earth, making them ever more aware of the dignity of the individual: the person is not a 'thing' or an 'object' to be used, but primarily a responsible 'subject', one endowed with conscience and freedom, called to live responsibly in society and history, and oriented towards spiritual and religious values (*CFL* 5).

In Britain today we are enslaved by many things: by consumerism and materialism, by loneliness and domestic brokenness, by our addictions and co-dependency, by drudgery in the workplace and fear of unemployment, by the concepts of the chic, the fashionable and the modern, by too much television and advertising, by lack of community and ability to communicate, by a rigid and legalistic approach to religious practice, by the speed and the noise of urban life. Formation must concern us profoundly with what it means to be free, through grace and in faith, of whatever enslaves us. Formation must affirm the fundamental dignity of every individual in a society which wields a vast and shifting array of criteria for assessing the relative worth of individuals. Those

who are freed *from* what binds them are freed *for* service to the Kingdom.

It follows, therefore, that formation implies *change*, *conversion* in the individual and *transformation* in the world. Every step in our journey of faith will be towards greater freedom and responsibility. But conversion is to no account if it begins and ends with the interior life of the individual. By conversion, says Bernard Lonergan, is understood

a transformation of the subject and his (*sic*) world. Normally it is a prolonged process . . . Conversion is existential, personal, utterly intimate. But it is not so private as to be solitary. It can happen to many, and they can form a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation and to help one another in working out the implications and fulfilling the promise of their new life. Finally, what can become communal, can become historical.²

Tad Dunne expands on this in his commentary on Lonergan's work. Conversion, or the movement of faith, hope and charity, normally returns the religious person

to the known world as the field upon which they must surrender to transcendent, loving Mystery, because they learn that the Divine Thou wills the good of the world and wills their cooperation and participation in that work, that labor of Divine Love.³

What is the link between conversion and change, between formation and transformation? For Tad Dunne, the Christian religious mind has depended on certainties, on 'beliefs we have committed ourselves to, even though we might not understand what effect these beliefs have in our culture'. The Christian ideals enshrined in, say, the beatitudes, seem far out of reach. 'Change' is something that happens in the secular world, and has scientific or political or economic causes.

But Gandhi saw it. His commitment to non-violence was not merely obedience to an injunction or an ideal. He understood how passive resistance worked to turn the hearts of enemies and to break down an us-against-them view of human conflicts.⁴

But as Christians, says Dunne, we tend to divide the secular from the religious:

We must point out that we are not speaking of two groups of people, each with its own kind of singlemindedness. We are speaking of single individuals with two minds at odds with one another: a spiritual mind that clings to truths and a secular mind that seeks explanations for change. We are speaking of people who have to live in a culture that differentiates the secular and the sacred, but lacks the power to integrate them. We are speaking of ourselves.⁵

The theme of the faith-life connection is also deep in *CFL*. John Paul II writes:

This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age. Therefore, I have maintained that a faith that does not affect a person's culture is a faith not fully embraced, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived (*CFL* 59).

Vaclav Havel, an artist, a Christian, and at the time of writing, a politician, suggests perhaps what the integration of which Dunne speaks might mean. He has written:

the Word of God is the source of all creation. But surely the same can be said, figuratively speaking, of every human action? . . . We have always believed in the power of human words to change history. Is the human word truly powerful enough to change the world and influence human history?⁶

Surely faith and the incarnation demand the answer 'yes'—providing we articulate our understanding that we depend on God's help. Jesus was the Word who changed human history once and for all time, but he was able to accomplish the work of his ministry and on the cross only because of his unique relationship with his Father. The work of formation, therefore, is *God's work*, not ours. 'God is the first and great teacher of his people' (*CFL* 61). The communion which we work to build is a mystery, because the Spirit is at work in ways that human knowing alone cannot grasp or control.

From this it follows that we understand that much of the work of formation takes place outside any formal or even informal context. Christian formation is a lifelong process of conversion for all of us. It can be stimulated and encouraged, but it is a gift of

God's grace and depends ultimately on each person's free response to God's call. People are not formed *by* others, still less by experts. Yet it is our task and the challenge offered by *CFL* to offer opportunities for formation—to sow seeds. More than this we cannot do. Here, I would like to go on to suggest what the implications of the understanding of formation that I have so far proposed are for the context and the manner in which it takes place.

Firstly, formation is necessary, as we have seen, to our understanding of the Church as communion, and therefore formation implies *community and community-building*. This work of community-building is seen as a preparation for the descent of the Holy Spirit. The spirit of community is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.⁷

Formation properly, therefore, will call the individual into a greater understanding of community and a greater wish to serve. Formation will be most effective when it takes place within the context of a given community, when it respects already-existing communities (be they parish, small group, or ecumenical gathering) and helps them to grow, one step at a time. The best place for formation is on-site, with the group or parish where it regularly meets. This is a critical point. When we work with whole groups, we often reach those who would be unlikely to take advantage of opportunities for 'adult education'. There is a risky tendency in the Church to invest all our energy in seeking out and cultivating the 'active parishioner'. But formation is as much about the little old lady with her rosary beads in the back pew as the highly motivated and occasionally over-clericalized 'lay leader'. And when or where it is necessary or preferable to provide formation at some other location, whole groups should attend together and individuals should understand that they are there on behalf of the group or community from which they come.

From this it follows that formation implies *structures*, whether that structure be loosely or tightly constructed. The 'structure' could be the *RCIA* group, the parish council, the parish team, the whole parish, the liturgy preparation group or more informal groups such as a bereavement self-help group or a prayer group. When members of such groups share in opportunities for growing in faith together, the structure itself is strengthened and helped to grow. It is also the task of formation to foster new structures where desirable.

There can be no community without *communication* and *communications skills*. There is an increasing understanding in Church life of the need for listening and groupwork skills, and such skills are being seen as a vital element in all formation, which always involves *small groups*. It is in small groups that people learn from the sharing of experience. Nowhere have I found this interconnection better expressed than in *The Easter people*:

If individuals can first find themselves in a small group where personal relations are possible, a sense of community is created which helps them to relate to the larger parish. Even then, community does not grow spontaneously. Good communication must be developed within the small group in order to create community, and then between groups to develop the unity of the parish. It is often at this point that the sense of community breaks down. Parishes should feel like an extended family but they often do not, precisely because the small group is not fostered and there is a breakdown in communication at this level (150).

We have benefited greatly in Britain from continuing reflection on the nature of the Latin American base Christian communities and the extent to which they offer an ideal for our own life as a Church. Some parishes have attempted and to a degree achieved a network of house or neighbourhood groups—although it is questionable to what extent these groups approximate to the Latin American model. There have been other experiments in inner cities to invite poor people to experience the gospel and community in this way. But our growing experience of what can happen in small groups of many types suggests that they too can be a powerful force for change and transformation. To focus too narrowly on rigid comparisons with the Latin American experience may lead us to ignore the signs of growth in our midst.

Many Christians in this country experience the community of which *The Easter people* speaks through their 'shifting allegiance' to a wide range of small groups. These may be relatively stable within the parish, or they may be temporary and/or ecumenical (for example, the series of Lent groups involved in the 'Not strangers but pilgrims' process). People may join small groups for only one day or the duration of a weekend or week-long conference. This shifting allegiance to a variety of types of small groups suits a culture distinguished by a high degree of geographical mobility: but such groups are none the less valuable for community-building

because they are temporary. Well-formed groups can, using scripture and the many other available resources, also take responsibility themselves for their formation.

There is a further factor, *collaboration* or *partnership*, which determines the effectiveness of formation. On partnership, *CFL* is almost offhand. It speaks of 'the new manner of active collaboration among priests, religious and the lay faithful'. It assumes the interdependence between priests and people and asserts boldly that Christ's mission to the world is a responsibility shared by priests, religious and lay people by virtue of our common baptism (*CFL* 15). This area was also hinted at in *The Easter people*, which recognized the enormous challenge of tackling collaboration:

If we are to develop the parish as a community, there must be some way in which parishioners can respond to their priests in a genuine dialogue. Our Church has not yet thought out sufficiently how to do this in practice (151).

Our diocesan experience affirms time and time again that formation is more challenging but infinitely more effective when carried out with groups and structures in which priests, religious and lay people are working together. The two preeminent examples for such groups are the parish council and the *RCIA* group—although any group in the parish can be formed collaboratively.

Finally, formation involves the call to *ministry*, seen as broadly as possible:

The Spirit of the Lord gives a vast variety of charisms, inviting people to assume different ministries and forms of service [which] exist in communion and on behalf of communion (*CFL* 20).

Formation implies building the confidence of ordinary people that they have something to offer, whether they are called early or late into the vineyard. This confidence-building starts with affirming, as *CFL* so clearly does, the holiness of people's everyday life. This 'vocation to holiness' is 'intimately connected to mission' (*CFL* 17).

What does all of this mean for our understanding of sacraments and sacramentality, and in particular our approach to the initiation of adults and children through baptism, confirmation and eucharist? Firstly, it is important to note that much of what has been written

here could have equally been drawn out of the text of the *RCIA*, the model for all initiation into the communion of the Church. Secondly, this approach to formation assumes that the catechesis of adults 'is the principal form of catechesis because it is addressed to persons who have the greatest responsibilities and the capacity to live the Christian message in its fully developed form' (*Catechesi tradendae* 43).

Furthermore, this approach to formation places the significance of the seven sacraments within the context of Christ the primordial sacrament. The sacraments are signs of transformation, and the community of the Church, the people of God, is itself a sacrament, a sign and instrument of union with God and the unity of all humanity (*Lumen gentium* 1). If we really grasped this sacramentality of the Christian community, says Thomas Hart, it would make an immense difference to our spirituality:

Is there any more compelling bearer of the holy than the human person made in God's image and likeness in the first place and, as a Christian, striving to put on Christ? This is the root of the Church's sacramentality.⁸

I have called this the 'mustard seed' approach—although any of the seed-sowing parables are helpful here—because, like the vision of Kingdom in the gospels, the vision of communion, ministry and mission offered by *CFL* and the *RCIA* can seem light years away. On a bad day, the soil can seem very infertile indeed and we are dependent on a very radical Christian hope. To be committed to this approach is itself an act of faith in which we do a lot of letting go and trust that the *ruach Yahweh* warmly breathes life into some of those seeds. William Johnston writes:

In the old days we said, 'Trust in God'. Now I hear people say, 'Trust in the process'. I have nothing against that; for it is God's process.⁹

For me, the paradigm for the approach I have offered is the parish day, in which up to a hundred or more people come together to celebrate the Eucharist, to share food, and to work in small groups to share their experience and vision of parish life. Such days are planned well in advance, and the process continues long beyond the day itself. There is a minimum of outside intervention

and a minimum of theological 'input'. The success of process offered seems to depend on a great deal of listening by all concerned, on the priest's willingness to give up some of his control, and the lay people's willingness to share responsibility for the life of the parish. These parish days can be the fertile ground of creative chaos.

There always seems to be, at these days, at least one person who acts as a highly visible symbol for me of what formation is really about: at one, a one-eyed tramp who sat at the back of the hall peacefully and relentlessly munching the sandwiches brought for the shared lunch; at another, a young blind man; at another, a woman in a wheelchair; at another, a mentally ill and potentially violent young man. In one inner city parish in which I have worked on and off for over two years, one of the decisions made during a parish day was to form a group to visit the sick. During the following year, the planning group formed themselves, with the enthusiastic support of the parish priest, into a 'parish council', who then presented themselves and the progress made by the parish during the year to all who attended a second parish day. On that day, I met a woman who had become a member of the visiting group. Poorly dressed, half toothless and entirely self-effacing, she gave in a small group a deeply moving account of the loneliness of the sick, of the value of listening, and the impact that her hospital visiting had had on her own faith. She, for me, is the human word that can change the course of history.

NOTES

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² Lonergan, Bernard: *Method in theology* (Seabury Press, New York, 1979) p 130.

³ Dunne, Tad: *Lonergan and spirituality: towards a spiritual integration* (Loyola University Press, Chicago, 1985).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 8.

⁶ Havel, Vaclav: undelivered speech, published in *The Independent*, 9 December 1989.

⁷ Peck, M. Scott: *The different drum* (Rider & Co., London, 1988) p 75.

⁸ Hart, Thomas N.: *The art of Christian listening* (Paulist Press, New York, 1980) p 7.

⁹ Johnston, William: *Being in love: the practice of Christian prayer* (Collins, London, 1988) p 88.